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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 002139

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [KPAO](#) [KMDR](#) [JO](#)
SUBJECT: JORDAN'S FIRST INDEPENDENT TV STATION CHANGES
HANDS; STAFF ENDS SIT-IN

REF: A. 07 AMMAN 3959
[1](#)B. AMMAN 315

Classified By: Charge Daniel Rubinstein for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. Nearly one year after its scheduled on-air debut, Jordan's first independent television station, ATV, has not yet begun broadcasting despite its second change of ownership in less than one year. In the midst of a week-long sit-in staged by employees complaining that they have not received their salaries for the last three months, ATV's new owner and CEO Talal Awamleh held a press conference on July 14 announcing that ATV will start transmission on January 1, [1](#)2009. While ATV's employees ended their protest after Awamleh pledged to resolve payment of salary issues immediately, some Jordanians continue to doubt that ATV will get on the air successfully - and whether it will live up to its billing as a major step forward in the development of independent media in Jordan even if it does hit the airwaves.
END SUMMARY.

OFF THE AIR: NEW STATION PLAGUED BY SETBACKS

[1](#)2. (U) ATV's new owner and CEO Talal Awamleh stated in a July 14 press conference that Jordan's first independent television station will finally begin transmission on January 1, 2009 after over a year of delays and two changes of ownership. Standing next to Jordanian Artists' Association chief Shahir Haddi and the head of the ATV employees' committee, Awamleh told the media on July 14 that ATV's new ownership is determined to begin its pilot terrestrial and satellite broadcast on December 1, 2008, one month before it begins transmission. Awamleh also announced that ATV will launch three separate channels- one for families, a news channel, and a radio channel.

[1](#)3. (U) Awamleh signed the deal to acquire ATV on July 10 from the Al Ajayeb for Investments Company, owned by Jordanian businessmen Mohammed Khalid Asfour and Mohammed Abdul Aati. Asfour and Aati had purchased the station for JD 15 million from the station's original owner, Jordanian businessman Mohammed Alayyan, last September. Awamleh, who also owns the Arab Telemedia Center, a major producer of Arabic language dramas, now owns 86% of the station, with the remainder staying in the hands of the Al Ajayeb conglomerate.

[1](#)4. (C) ATV's status has been the subject of intense speculation in Jordan since the GOJ broadcast licensing authority ordered the suspension of ATV's satellite signal on August 1, 2007, the day after then-owner Mohammed Alayyan had announced the imminent commencement of ATV's transmission (Ref A). After changing ownership in September, 2007, the station continued to be plagued with problems. ATV Managing Director Zaid Rashdan told PDoffs in January of this year that the station would be on the air by this summer, stating that lingering financial and contractual issues were preventing the station's launch. While Rashdan stated that ATV's contractual obligations to Jordan Television to lease its terrestrial signal- and not GOJ pressure- were the "principle obstacle" to the station's launch, press

commentators, ATV staff, and some GOJ officials asserted that the government's concerns over ATV's independent status were part of the station's problems. "I think that ATV is going to change the entire state of television in Jordan, and this makes some people in the government nervous. Maybe some individual officials are concerned about taking responsibility for something like this, worried they might be blamed if things go wrong," former Programs Manager Paul Hijazin said (Ref B).

"THIS IS A MESS": EMPLOYEES FRUSTRATED WITH STATION'S STATE OF LIMBO

15. (C) As ATV remained off the air through the winter months, employees continued to leave the company complaining that they had "nothing to do" and were not being paid on time. Alia al-Kadi, a former ATV employee who left to work with Queen Rania's office, told PDoff on July 15 that she left because she "didn't see a future" at the television station. "We were all so excited when the station started. I wouldn't have worked there unless I was excited, but it was clear as time went on that this was a mess and we didn't know when we would be on the air," she said, adding that departures had increased this spring as the station's state of limbo continued.

16. (C) On July 6, many of ATV's nearly 250 remaining employees began a protest, including a sit-in, claiming that they had not been paid their full salaries for the past three months. The protest garnered significant attention in the Jordanian media, and on July 10 newspapers featured comments by protesters stating that they would "escalate the

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situation" if they were not paid soon. The protests drew GOJ involvement, with Minister of Information and Communications Nasser Judeh visiting ATV employees on July 8. During his visit to the station, Judeh stated that the GOJ is interested in the matter and would work to protect the employees' rights.

17. (C) The head of ATV's employees' committee, Saleh Madi, joined Awamleh in the July 14 press conference and announced the end of the sit-in. He cited Awamleh's assurances that salary payment issues would be resolved promptly. Despite the assurances, media observers contend that ATV employees remain concerned. Jordan Times journalist Mohammed Ghazal, who has been covering the story for his newspaper, told PDoff on July 15 that his recent interviews with the station's staff "don't make me confident about what will happen at this station." "I have followed this story from the very beginning, and while I know all the details things remain murky. No one really knows why the station has remained off the air this long, and no one really knows if they're going to go on the air on January 1," he added. Kadi agreed, stating that she remains in contact with friends at the station. "I still talk to my friends at ATV, and they are all just waiting to see what the new management does. They are waiting for a sign this is really going to take off, because it has been really frustrating for them," she said.

WILL ATV BE TRULY INDEPENDENT?

18. (C) While observers watch to see if the station's new ownership will make good on its promise to finally take ATV to the airwaves, some question whether the station's billing as Jordan's first independent television station will be a casualty of the long delays. Nisreen Shomayleh, a former ATV reporter who now works for Saudi Channel 2 Television's Amman bureau, told PDoff on July 15 that she is concerned that ATV's new ownership will have to succumb to increased GOJ influence over the station's management in order to get the station on the air quickly. "There are a lot of journalists who think that ATV is just going to be a new version of (the government-controlled) Jordan Television (JTV), and that's the only reason the government is going to finally let this station move forward," she said. "I would never go back to

work at ATV, because I refuse to become a government mouthpiece and that is what I am afraid ATV is going to become," she asserted. Ghazal echoed her concerns. "In my interviews with the station's new owners, I didn't think they were being completely honest and they were holding a lot back about who is involved in this station and why things have taken so long. There are still a lot of questions about ATV's future, and I don't think they've been answered by this new change of ownership," he concluded.

19. (C) COMMENT: Given repeated unfulfilled assertions by ATV management that the station will soon go on the air, Awamleh's promises to transmit ATV's signal by the new year will be greeted with skepticism by most Jordanians. Commentators and media observers continue to debate the differing explanations for why ATV is still not on the air -- including financial considerations, pressure from competitors, and alleged GOJ concerns about the effects of a truly independent television station in Jordan. The most important question moving forward is whether ATV's new ownership will maintain its focus on ATV's original billing as the country's first independent television station as it strives to meet its public promises to pay its employees and get the station on the air within six months. If the station does go on the air at the new year, observers will be closely watching ATV's content to determine just how independent the new station is. END COMMENT.

Rubinstein